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# EAST TIMOR: THE SHOW GOES ON

The try out of East Timor has been underway since January 1989 when Suharto took the decision to lift the *batik curtain* which for 14 years held back one of the most tragic war scenes to have taken place in this century. Call it a puppet stage, a dressing room, or a diplomatic gamble, it is an undertaking which has yet to fulfill the expectations of the political game being courageously played out by the Jakarta government.

Since the so-called *opening up*, a series of events have been performed on different stages. Among those worth mentioning are the much publicised visits of the Pope and the American ambassador. Both events reminded Indonesia of how dearly its diplomatic gamble could cost if East Timor is to continue on show at this stage.

The government in Jakarta has possibly learnt from these past mistakes and the stalemate of the visit of the Portuguese parliamentarians, originally scheduled for August, may be an indication of this. The Indonesian authorities are undoubtedly aware that it is not in their best interests to host the visit of their main diplomatic foe in the face of present national and international conjunctures.

*National crisis*

At the national level, presidential succession is a very sensitive issue. Anti-Suharto feeling is running high. The sudden removal of Gen L.B. Murdani as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces has brought both the President and Murdani to an uneasy relationship which may well be exploited by the anti-Suharto camp.

It is believed that Murdani was the prime mover behind the military's rejection of Suharto's choice of Vice-President. This led to Brigadier General Ibrahim Saleh's violent reproach of the President on March 11, 1989. The military's soft approach to recent student activism in Indonesia is also believed to be under Murdani's order. And finally the rumour goes that Murdani masterminded the recent insurgent uprising in Aceh in North Sumatra. The veracity of these allegations can scarcely be doubted, and the destabilising effect of such reports would undoubtedly work in the favour of anti-Suharto groups.

Indonesia presents a potentially explosive array of regional and ethnic tensions. What would happen if these tensions got out of control, perhaps triggered by a downturn in the country's economy? Would Sumatra, the richest Indonesian island, follow the secessionist path of West Papua and the South Moluccas?

Although it is too soon to dramatise the overall situation, the winds of change are certainly making their way through Indonesia's breezing holes. Any visitor who is familiar with Indonesia's socio-political scenario would agree that a new phase is taking place in this country's political history. The existing gap between the president and the army is widening. Yet the increasingly powerful influence that Benny Murdani wields over the Armed Forces could lead to a showdown of the two factions in the countdown to the 1992 presidential elections.

*The Timor factor*

On the surface, the issue of East Timor plays no part in this factional intrigue. But unofficially this 15-year old struggle is a hot topic. Certain individuals and groups, mainly of the Indonesian liberal intelligentsia, believe that this is the right time to boost diplomatic efforts in the interests of self-determination. These are the same people who are demanding democratisation in Indonesia to the extent that it implies more mass participation in political structures and less government interference in the affairs of groups and individuals.

The situation in East Timor alone is presenting a new dimension. The period following 1986 saw two promising changes in the socio-political panorama which gradually brought the young East Timorese students in particular, and the people in general, to play a more daring and dangerous role in the quest for self-determination.

First, a new breed of students is emerging and the impact of this, both on and off the campuses of educational institutions, should give rise to a good deal of positive thought and action. It is the end of an era of fear and retreat, which for years held back the people's nationalist anger against the Indonesian occupation of their island. For some time the struggle for self-determination relied heavily on arms and was carried out by the most able senior citizens and nationalists of the pre-invasion period. Now, ironically, it is the young Timorese, growing up under Indonesian occupation and in a climate of *panca sila*-oriented values, who are the ones leading the struggle. They are proud of their new role - the vanguards of a struggle resulting from a situation of despotism, militarism, nepotism and political awareness, all conditioned by Jakarta's jingoistic adventure.

The unexpected came in October 1989 during the Pope's visit when, in an extraordinary show of courage and determination, the students fired their first warning shot which caught the Indonesian authorities by surprise and reminded the church leader that an end to the struggle is a long way off yet. Protests of one kind or another have since taken place throughout the main urban

centres. Most recently, in Dili on 4/9/90, the students again made their pro-independence feelings clear to a crowd of 20.000-30.000 at the end of a mass celebrating the 50th anniversary of the diocese of Dili.

Secondly, the post 1986 period saw the East Timorese people fortifying their unity in a way that would never have seemed possible before. The unbearable conditions created by the Indonesian military machinery were the prime reason for this unity. The process came to its peak with the sudden announcement by Xanana, the charismatic leader of the resistance forces, of his resignation as a member of the central committee of Fretilin. The decision was warmly welcomed by the masses and, in particular, by both the East Timorese intelligentsia living in East Timor and those studying in Indonesia. They saw this as a boost to flagging Timorese spirits. Also it meant a compromise which could eventually mean an end to the political jargon, revolutionary labels and ideological differences, which have for a long time kept the East Timorese people at a speed of one step forward and two steps backwards towards self-determination.

Xanana's political posture is not a mere accident. Being a genuine product of the 15-year old struggle, Xanana is well equipped to lead the struggle into the 90s. It is a decade of challenge - but the time is ripe for change.

*Developing East Timor*

Almost every East Timorese knows the Indonesian President by his nationally adopted name : "Bapak Pembangunan", or the Father of Development. Rightly so - for the last 15 years East Timor has been the recipient of billions of Rupiahs "generously" donated by the Jakarta government to develop the island it invaded in December 1975.

Tourists, with intentions other than simply visiting the island, will be astonished to discover that the physical vestiges of a tragedy which swept away 1/3 of the Timorese population are barely detectable. Such is Indonesia's success that it has transformed its bloody hands into generous ones - the wholesome hands of development.

There is, however, no need to remind Indonesia that its campaign to win *the hearts and minds* of the local people is far from over. It is complete nonsense to speak of just development for the people of East Timor in a socio-political and economic situation of despotism, oppression and lack of individual freedom. The

individual's right to enjoy social and economic progress cannot be in any way separated from the right to enjoy political freedom. And by invading East Timor Indonesia has violated the most fundamental right of the Timorese people to freely determine their own political status. Without this freedom, the concept of development is purely and simply a sham, which is both alien and irrelevant to the political aspirations of the people of East Timor.

*World trends*

The cold war is over - or at least it appears to be. The so-called presidential summits have brought a new dimension to superpower relations. At their most recent summit, the two world giants jointly condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This augurs well for the future of international relations. Yet world wide secessionist demands are increasing at an alarming rate.

While Suharto-Murdani frictions deepen and the East Timorese people are still firm on their feet, the Gulf crisis and secessionist movements around the globe have the potential to arouse Indonesian fears of parallelism.

Whilst Indonesia is fighting a losing battle in the international arena, its policies with regard to East Timor manage to go unchallenged, thanks to the hypocrisy and double standards of the so-called democratic and socialist countries - the promoters of freedom, human rights and democracy in the world. East Timor is without doubt no match for Kuwait or Cambodia when the name of the game is political economy. Economic policy is the prime concern, in that it implies freedom for US business and its corporate member states to invest, sell and accumulate profit at the expense of the third world countries. Obviously, to enhance business confidence, this freedom needs to be maintained at all costs and this often results in open and covert military acts of terrorism in the host countries.

Nonetheless, the UN's heavy involvement in a settlement for Cambodia, and now in the Gulf, is a sign of hope for the Timorese impasse. Indonesia's Cambodian mission is vital. Being the host of the so-called Jakarta Informal Meeting, Indonesia was able to bring the four warring factions to the round-table on various occasions.

However Indonesia's truly good intentions are a mix of skepticism and irony. The irony is that Indonesia is able to play the impeccable double role of peace-hunter for Cambodia and head-hunter in East Timor. And ironic too is the fact that when Xanana put forward a similar plan for peace in East Timor, on the occasion of the cease-fire in 1983, Indonesia replied with a heavy deployment of its armed forces which led to the death, disappearance,

imprisonment and torture of countless Timorese. The acceptance of Indonesia's behaviour reinforces the hypocrisy and double standards of the leading countries of the West and East in their approach to issues of the Third World.

*Peace is possible in East Timor*

Are the above trends an indicator of a possible change in the future world system? And if this is the case, how resistant will the international community be to the ever-increasing bids of various state orders for political disintegration? Could these trends affect Indonesia? What will happen if Suharto stays in power beyond 1992?

Military coups are not part of Indonesia's history, but theoretically it is possible. One should not forget that the reign of Suharto's only predecessor, Sukarno, ended in a "coup d'etat" which led to the death of approximately 1 million people, conservatively 750.000 arrests and which uprooted the country's socio-political and economic situation.

In the Southeast Asian theatre Indonesia emerges as a paradoxical figure of power and vulnerability. With 26 provinces (excluding East Timor) covering a total land area of 735.381 square miles, and an ethnic mosaic of people spread over 13.667 islands, it is ironic that Indonesia closely resembles the colonial imperialism of Portugal towards the end of the 60s, just prior to the downfall of this once great European colonial master.

Secessionist movements in Indonesia's history should not be undervalued, but the real threat to national stability, as I see it, comes from the very motto used by Indonesia to consolidate its might: "Unity in diversity". This unity could give way to chaos should the situation deteriorate under the circumstances previously discussed. Indonesia has also taken a risk with its 15-year occupation of East Timor. The issue is now being exploited by Indonesian dissidents and politicians alike for their own purposes. If history is a process of repetition, the chances of the Timor impasse being overcome are great.

Clearly the time is ripe for a peace settlement but the question relates to the process. In the framework of the East Timor dispute, any model of "Free Association", insofar as it suggests "less sovereignty", will meet with great indifference on the part of the Timorese people. The nature of the Timor problem, when properly highlighted, is unique. After all East Timor's path to self-determination is defined by the clear colonial boundary between East Timor and Indonesia.

How could an independent East Timor affect the Indonesian unitary state order? It is surprising that East Timor, sharing with Indonesia no common colonial master nor cultural background, is after almost 500 years of domination by Portugal, able to pose a threat to Indonesia's unity in diversity.

In spite of all of this, there is room for optimism. The current realities in international relations show how the world is on the verge of a socio-political breakdown, while economically, its way to global integration is irreversible. What is required now is a formula that suits best the interests of all the parties involved, i.e. East Timor and Indonesia in particular, and Portugal as the administering power.

This formula, as I perceive it, will redress the economic and security problems on a friendly and mutually cooperative basis. Further formulation of such a model requires a top level UN-think tank apparatus which would include representatives from East Timor, Indonesia and Portugal. The outcome of this model, or other proposed forms of political association, will have to be decided upon by the East Timorese people via a UN-supervised referendum. This is the only way to ensure a peaceful implementation of self-determination.

*Conclusion*

If the ongoing analysis is accurate, one could conclude that the 1990s are going to be a big test to Indonesia's "unity in diversity". However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to anticipate the likely outcome, except to say that as demands for political autonomy and democratisation around the globe increase, Indonesia will find it difficult to resist the winds of change. Whichever way Indonesia sways, it is unlikely that bringing the curtain down on East Timor will be able to subdue the struggle being played out behind the scenes.

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September 1990